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E-BIZ

JIM CARROLL

The horror, the horror

We are told that E-commerce is a revolution in the making. If it is a revolution, it also has all the characteristics of a bloody one. The stories from the front lines aren't pretty. Consider this all-too-common horror story:

You have invested a lot of time and effort to establish a store on the Internet. You've got a hot product that customers want to buy. Life in E-commerce land is good.

Or so you think. It's Friday, the day before a long weekend. At 4 p.m., reports start to trickle in from customers visiting your Web site that they have been unable to order on-line. They do everything correctly, they tell you, right down to carefully providing details about their credit card. Except, they say, your store keeps coming back to tell them that their card has been declined.

Knowing that their credit is good, they advise you that you probably should be aware that your store is broken. You begin to investigate. Perhaps it is Murphy, eager to mock you with his law and ready to cast doubt on your belief that the Internet is ready for prime time. You try a few transactions on your own, only to see your credit cards rejected too.

You call the company that handles the credit card processing for your store, only to be told by a message that it is now after hours and staff have gone home for the weekend. It is 5:05 p.m., on the eve of a three-day holiday. You are suddenly cast adrift on the E-commerce battlefield, without any armour, and without any help.

You have a hot product, you have customers — and your store has just gone down the tubes.

You leave a message with the credit card processor, pleading for someone to call you back. You send out an E-mail message to everyone who has ever been involved with the creation of your store, asking if anyone can help. You put a big notice up on your on-line store, informing customers that you are out of business.

You keep checking your store throughout the weekend, vainly hoping that perhaps Murphy himself will magically fix the problem. Such is not to be.

Finally, at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday — almost 96 hours after the problem first began — someone from the credit card processor calls you back. There is a problem, you repeat. Thus begins the typical E-commerce runaround.

The credit card company insists that surely the problem can't be with its technology. It must be the other guy — the company on whose computer the store is actually located, the caller says.

Several hours later, they call you back again. They've found the problem. Something that linked the technology of the store to the technology of the credit card processor was "broken." They've fixed it, and you're back in business. They offer profuse apologies.

Is there a moral to this story? Quite a few, actually. The E-commerce industry needs to grow up — in a hurry. Any company involved in the industry must be prepared to offer support, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

E-commerce balkanization, in which each of the many companies involved in your store might eagerly blame the others, must stop. There must be one point of contact who can resolve your issue. Responsibility must come to all involved.

Until then, the E-commerce revolution is one that is clearly being fought by amateurs.

Jim Carroll is co-author of the new book Selling Online: How to be a Successful E-Commerce Merchant in Canada *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*